

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**EXAMINING THE CASES: ATTITUDES TOWARDS
AN INSTRUCTION IN THE LOCAL LANGUAGE**

IEQ undertaken by:

American Institutes for Research

**in collaboration with
The Academy for Educational Development
Education Development Center, Inc.
Juárez and Associates, Inc.
The University of Pittsburgh**

**Report prepared by:
A. K. Awedoba**

March 2001

Contract #HNE-I-00-97-00029-00

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*Come on, let's go to school
That we may learn to read book
How sweet is school
Better than herding livestock*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on an in-depth study of a primary school in the Upper East Region of Ghana carried out between November 1999 and July 2000¹. It is one of six schools studied. While four of the schools are rural public schools and a fifth school is a private urban school, this one is perhaps classifiable as a public 'semi-urban' school with the semblance of a private school². Data collection was in two phases: the initial or pre-intervention phase when respondents were asked about the official language policy but not told what the policy stipulates and phase two when respondents were acquainted with the policy.

The study centered on observations of the classroom environment, one-on-one interviews with randomly selected pupils and their parents, the teachers of classes one to four, the headteacher and other stakeholders including the PTA chair, District level education officials and the local teachers training college authorities as well as with some trainee students from the locality. These informants, as the main stakeholders for this school, hold perceptions on what should pass for Educational Quality and their attitudes provide a window for understanding what goes on in the school and what the future holds for educational policy and what can be done to improve the quality of primary school education in Ghana.

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE POLICY AND LANGUAGE USE

- Noto is a non-implementation school i.e. the official language policy is not implemented.
- English is medium of instruction (MoI) right from class one.
- The predominant language of the area is taught as a subject but there were no textbooks in it and teachers were not enthusiastic about teaching the local language.
- Parents and stakeholders including the officials of the ministry of Education are aware that the policy is not being implemented but they do nothing about it.

It was found that comprehension of the predominant local language was widespread among Noto pupils, about 70% of whom spoke the predominant local language as a first or second language. Thirteen other different languages served as first language for the less than 40% who did not give the local language as their first language. Most of the children were bi-lingual in English and the local language and some pupils were tri-lingual.

¹ This school will be known as Noto and in the test scores it is labeled as Samuel. These are not its real names.

² See Chapter Six of CRIQPEG, AIR and USAID (2000) for a profile of the school.

BACKGROUND TO COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

The community holds generally the view that quality education should be delivered in the medium of English and although there is no overt antagonism to the teaching of Kasem, the prevalent local language, as a subject, the community does not insist on its teaching either. This attitude is not new. There is a historical dimension to community attitudes to use of the local language as medium of instruction and its teaching. The first school in the Ghanaian North was established by the Catholic Mission in Navrongo in about 1907. They developed a writing system and primers for the Kasem language and translated Biblical texts into the local language to serve both liturgical and educational purposes. Since the colonial era, the Mission schools in the locality have taught the Kasem language while the local authority or Government schools have not. But even in the former, it remained a school offence well into the 1960s to speak any Ghanaian language on the school compound. As the hold of the Missionaries on schools declined and the pioneer Canadian missionaries were replaced with African missionaries interest and commitment to use of the local language in primary schools declined.

The original purpose for education was perceived to be the production of catechists (for this literacy in Kasem was a prerequisite) and a clerical staff capable of understanding instructions in English and carrying them out to service the colonial administrative machinery (Bening 1990). To the local people, education and conversion to Catholicism were perceived to be one and the same. As a result, opposition to education was initially considerable and the British had to coerce chiefs who in turn compelled some of their subjects to send wards to school. However, as the earlier crop of literates gained paid employment and with it enhanced incomes, education began to appeal to the local populace. The perception that education should enhance the chance to obtain a paid job (clerical type jobs) and that such jobs require literacy skills in English remains vibrant in the area where until recently the lack of commercial enterprises and industries has meant that only clerical jobs were the only credible alternative to traditional farming which has been regarded as economically unrewarding and energy sapping. (See also Grindal 1974 on some Sisala youths perspectives on the rationale for education among a neighbouring people). There is also a general Ghanaian tendency to measure level of education by perceived fluency and command or sophistication in the use of English. For example, in another of the IEQ2 study sites, a parent is reported to have remarked that a truly educated person is 'one who has forgotten his mother tongue'. It is against this background that we need to study the attitudes of the Noto school catchment's community.

Pre-intervention interviews with parents, teachers and teacher trainees and other stakeholders, confirm the impression that the wider community prefers the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools. The community position, echoed by one illiterate parent, seems to be that an early use of English would enhance the learning of that language; furthermore, fluency in English is itself evidence of formal education, a gateway to employment in the formal sector.

PARENTS' PREFERENCES

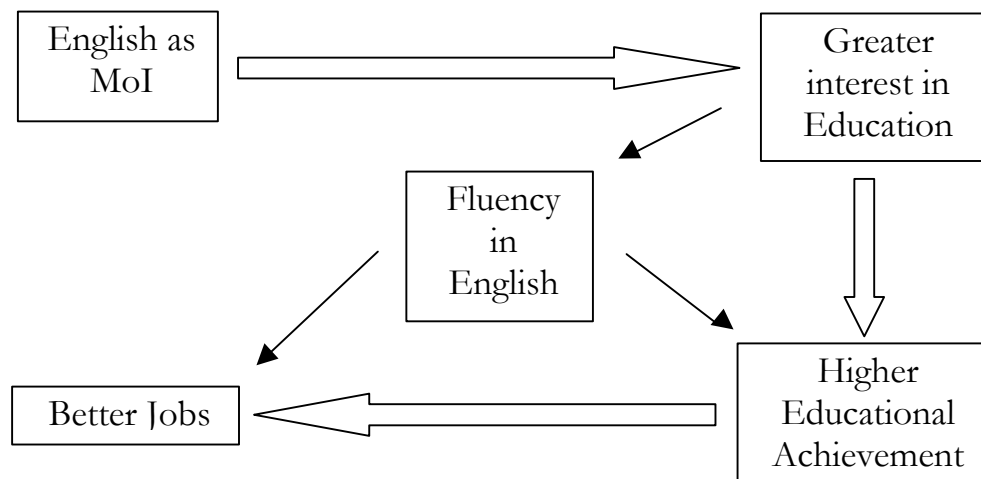
Most parents did not initially know anything about the official language policy which stipulated that predominant local languages should serve as media of instruction for the first three years of primary education. Against this background, our findings showed that at the initial interview encounter nearly all the parents interviewed preferred as Medium of Instruction the use of English rather than the local language, Kasem. Their reasons were as follows:

- As a mother tongue and prevalent language of the community, children are sufficiently equipped in Kasem and its learning need not therefore be considered as a priority;
- Good command of Kasem did not necessarily enhance future prospects. **'Kasem will not help the child'**, one non-Kasena parent remarked. Non-Kasena parents in particular subscribed to this view.

Nevertheless, there was a minority who favoured a bi-lingual medium involving these two languages, since they said they perceived the two languages to be complementary.

It would appear that most parents assume that use of English as a MOI helps children learn English a reflection of the 'more English earlier means better English' persuasion referred to by Hawkes (1977?); and that competence in English promotes education and a good education improves pupils' future prospects in life. These assumptions are implied in comments like the following: **"I prefer English .. because that will make the child have a lot of interest to learn than when Kasem is used"** (remarked by farmer with six years of primary education).

Chart 1: Perceptions About English Medium and Future Prospects



The feeling that literacy in English is the basis for future success in life is reflected in a remark made by an illiterate parent:

“I see the difference between those who are illiterate and those who are literate; so I want my child to learn English and become an important person in future.”

There is also a minority perception that a Kasem MOI might retard learning. One non-Kasena parent said he insisted that his children did not speak Kasem at home. Implied in his comment is a perception that use of English even in the home would enhance the child’s competence in English.

The pre-intervention or initial interviews reveal that although parents thought all subjects on the timetable were important they rated English and Mathematics highest and ranked Ghanaian language and Music lowest.

KNOWLEDGE AND BEHAVIOUR

The researchers found it intriguing that when the official language policy, which the majority of parents interviewed did not know, was presented to them, almost all changed their views on the irrelevance of the local language. They now said they felt that the use of the Ghanaian Language as MoI and its teaching were very important. They understood the basis for the policy to be that learning would be enhanced if the medium of instruction were the child’s language. Mr. Achilles, a retired civil servant echoed this sentiment in the statement below³.

“The children already speak the language (the L1), so at the basic stage it is better to teach them in the language so that they will understand things better. At that stage they need to be taught in a language they will understand .. clearly. So from P4 they have already got the basics of their own language. They can then use English as a medium and then have Kasem as a subject.”

Some parents lamented on the possibility of cultural alienation due to an exclusion of the local language from the school curriculum. This is the concern expressed in the following quote from a parent.

“This is precisely what we have just been discussing. Because my boy comes home, he cannot even count in Kasem from one to twenty. But he can count in English up to hundred, which isn’t good enough. He knows A,B,C,D up to Z [Roman alphabet] but he doesn’t know a, e, i, o, u,], e [Kasem vowel alphabet?]; so I think it is not fair.”

³ Personal names cited in the paper are fictitious and this if for informant confidentiality.

A Mother's Vignette:

Mother Cleo, an elementary school leaver who wanted the best education for her son, had earlier preferred English as school subject and instructional medium. At the post-intervention focus group interview she changed her mind and opted for local language medium and in doing so revealed her true feelings on the language issue. She said she had never been taught her Mother Tongue in her school days and consequently, was not literate in this language. This has been a source of occasional embarrassment to her. For example, she once had to decline an invitation to read the scriptures in Kasem at a church service; the pastor had assumed that being an educated Kasena she ought to be literate in that language. It was mortifying not to be able to read her first language, a thing that some illiterate Southern Ghanaian old ladies lacking formal education could do and she had always admired such women for their ability to read the Bible in their local languages.

Information on Noto parents shows that majority are literate and fall within the 30-40 years age group. Over 80% were from the locality and spoke the predominant local language. The rest are of several different ethnicities. Parents' occupations were varied but farmers and wage earners (civil servants) were in the majority. Generally those with children or wards in this school were relatively better off than the average local person.

The perceptions of parents interviewed seem to be representative of the opinions of the parents of other children in this school and perhaps also of the parents of children in less endowed schools in this area, such as the Damte school⁴. The popularity and appeal of Noto is based on its use of an English medium which was necessitated initially by the ethnic mix of the Noto township.

All this begins to change when parents are themselves told that the Government policy advocates local languages as medium of instruction at the lower grades and that this is a better for the children. Then, it dawns on them that this must indeed be more reasonable than the former insistence that things local were inferior.

⁴ The team paid a two-day visit to this school to observe activities.

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

The teachers interviewed included classroom teachers, supervisors and teacher trainees. All, except the trainees, were professional teachers with several years of experience; all, except one, were from the locality and spoke the local language.

The profiles of the teachers present a number of paradoxes. None of the three teachers whose first language is Kasem had been trained in a Teachers college teaching Kasem. Only one of them, the class four teacher, claimed to be able to read and write Kasem. On the other hand, Class Three teacher who does not speak Kasem was actually trained in a college where Kasem is taught. She attended some of the Kasem classes at college although her objective was not to pass the prescribed examination in Kasem but rather to prepare to take the examination in Twi, which the college did not teach.

The only teacher who seemed to be fully conversant with the Government's official school language policy was the teacher who did not teach the Ghanaian language and did not sympathise with the policy. The Headteacher who usually stood in for class three teacher to teach Kasem to this class did not seem to know the policy fully while class two teacher's understanding of the policy was partial. None of these teachers uses Kasem as a medium of instruction in class (not even the class one teacher). With the exception of Class Four teacher the rest did not think it was useful to teach Kasem, the main local language.

PROFILES OF TEACHERS

The Class one teacher was not introduced to the teaching of Kasem in training college and she did not enjoy the language classes at College. She can, by her own admission, read and write Kasem. At her college the introduction to language teaching was general and was not aimed at primary school teaching. This teacher graded Mathematics, English and Integrated Science as very important subjects but Ghanaian Language, Religious and Moral Education and Music and Dance were only good to teach but not important to her.

Class Two teacher, a 38 year old, speaks the local language as her first language but said she did not read or write this. She made it clear that she did not learn to teach any Ghanaian languages in College. This seems surprising in views of the requirement that every student learns a Ghanaian language at Teacher Training College. Teacher rates all subjects on the timetable as very important except Music and Ghanaian Language, which she rates as only important.

Class Three teacher was 38 years, did not come from the area and did not speak the predominant local language fluently although she had participated in language classes at the college where the predominant local language was taught. She graded Mathematics, English and Integrated Science as

very important subjects but Ghanaian Language, Religious and Moral Education and Music and Dance were only good to teach but not important. She suggested that the time allowed for Ghanaian Languages on the timetable be reduced to allow more time for the other subjects.

Clearly, the classroom teachers did not think they were doing the wrong thing in not implementing the policy and they felt that they had the support of the stakeholders in this.

The two senior education officials interviewed were from the locality and one had studied the predominant local language up to university degree level. The officials were fully conversant with the official school language policy and would wish to see it implemented. They appreciated the benefits of local language medium instruction but they did not feel that Noto's non-implementation of the policy should invite punitive sanctions.

It can be concluded that, teachers' preparation for Ghanaian language teaching was limited or if not nonexistent. Teachers were trained in colleges where their first languages were not taught. However, at the training colleges, they participated in classes where languages that they did not speak were being taught. These teachers were exposed to the rudiments of language teaching but nothing more since the language courses run by colleges were meant for teachers who are first language speakers. A teacher who has not been taught his first language as a subject and its teaching methodology may not know enough of it (or about it) to be able to teach that language effectively, even if he or she is familiar with general teaching methods. This is what prevails in Noto.

FINDINGS FROM THE LOCALITY'S TEACHERS TRAINING COLLEGE

Given that there is a Teachers Training College in the area, we may ask if the attitudes of teachers of Noto would have been different if they had been trained in the local college rather than in some other college, as has been the case. Investigations conducted at the College with tutors and final year students suggested that the local language was indeed being taught and students understood the official language policy, however there was not much sympathy for it because students felt that an English medium was more beneficial to pupils in the primary school. This attitude is echoed in the remarks of a male student and who says:

“The policy does not favour our people. Children acquire languages better in their early years. It is therefore better to start with English as medium of instruction.”

Another student, a female, says something similar:

“I feel that they need to use English right from the lower levels. This is the stage at which the children learn English more effectively and establish a foundation for a good command of the English language for the future.”

With attitudes like these, it appears that teachers who implement the policy would do so out of obligation and not from a genuine conviction that the policy is beneficial. Perhaps, these comments reflect ingrained attitudes that cut across a section of the community, as was suggested above. Lapses in teacher training are hereby exposed. While the college had tutors who had been trained to degree levels in the local language, these tutors do not appear to have imparted to their students the rationale for the use of the Ghanaian language as medium of instruction. Student tutors remained unconvinced that mother tongue education had any pedagogical benefits. See my colleague’s presentation on teacher training in another Ghanaian college where attitudes appear to be more positive.

PUPILS

The perceptions and views of pupils on preferred instructional mediums and language usage in pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil encounters in and outside the classrooms are insightful. They shed light on the issues of interest in the IEQ2 research.

In pupil-pupil interactions, one out of three pupils preferred Kasem and the rest opted for English. Those who use English in inter-pupil interactions do so for various reasons, which include the feeling that English is good and has prospects.

For example, a class four child says, **“English can send me anywhere I like where people do not speak Kasem..”**

A class two pupil would prefer English because it is more widely spoken: **“I would opt for English. If you meet somebody and the person spoke English you would understand him or her.”**

All of these children gave English and Kasem as the languages spoken in the school. They thought English was more popular in the School than Kasem, the local language, and that English was the medium of classroom intercourse.

The languages that pupils used in class for interaction among themselves were English and Kasem. Three out of four gave English as the medium of classroom interaction among pupils. The reasons advanced were as follows:

- Some pupils said they were incapable of speaking the local language fluently. This is captured in

the remark of a class three child who says, **“I don’t speak Kasem properly, so English is what I can best express myself well in.”**

- English has become a Lingua Franca, the medium for communication between children who do not understand each other’s languages. A class two child seems to echo this view when he says, **“My friends understand English but I cannot understand Twi and Ewe.”**
- The perception that speaking English rather than a local language was in itself intrinsically good.
- Teachers’ insistence that pupils speak English rather than the local language. The following comment by a class one pupil suggests this: **“Our madam said we should not be speaking Kasem.”**

The last quote indicates that the attitudes of teachers have a role in children’s disinterest in the use of the local language.

Those who prefer Kasem do so because they cannot express themselves in English. This view is suggested by what this class two child has to say: **“When you have not understood something and you cannot express your difficulty in English, you use Kasem.”**

TEACHER-PUPIL INTERACTIONS AND LANGUAGE PREFERENCES

The role of teachers in pupils’ preference for English as a medium in pupil-pupil interactions in the classroom cannot be denied. Teachers themselves set the example by their choice of medium for communication with individual children. Pupils’ responses suggest that in classroom interactions with teacher, only in one out of six cases did teacher use Kasem to the pupil. In all other cases it is English. Outside the classroom teacher used English in three out of four cases. Pupils felt that teacher used English in all cases when he or she communicated with others in the classroom. When pupils were asked about the medium of communication between the teacher and themselves and between the teacher and other pupils in classroom, majority suggested that this was English. Class Three teacher was said to use English exclusively with pupils both inside and outside the classroom. No pupil recollected her having used any other language and this is to be expected since she did not speak Kasem. Class Two teacher used slightly more Kasem than the others. Of the Kasem-speaking teachers, the class four teacher used Kasem the least, according to the perceptions of the children.

Though pupils comments were based on recollection and impression, the clear picture is that teachers use far more English with children than Kasem, whether in the classroom or outside. It is only in the case of Kasem lessons that Kasem is used as a medium of instruction. Even then, it is sometimes in a bi-lingual medium involving English mixed with the local language. Class three pupils said that the Headteacher teaches the local language in Kasem intermixed with English.

When pupils were asked to indicate a preference for an instructional medium for Environmental Studies, all children remarked that this subject was taught in English. While there was no objection to

the use of English to teach Environmental Studies, nevertheless, half of the sample would wish to see a Ghanaian language medium used, if they had the choice.

HOW BENEFICIAL IS THE CONSISTENT USE OF AN ENGLISH MOI IN NOTO?

As the test score in the box plots below show, this school which is labelled ‘Samuel’ here, is not very strong on English. It is only slightly better than the four rural schools studied. In the latter the medium is a combination of English and the predominant local tongue.

Chart 2.

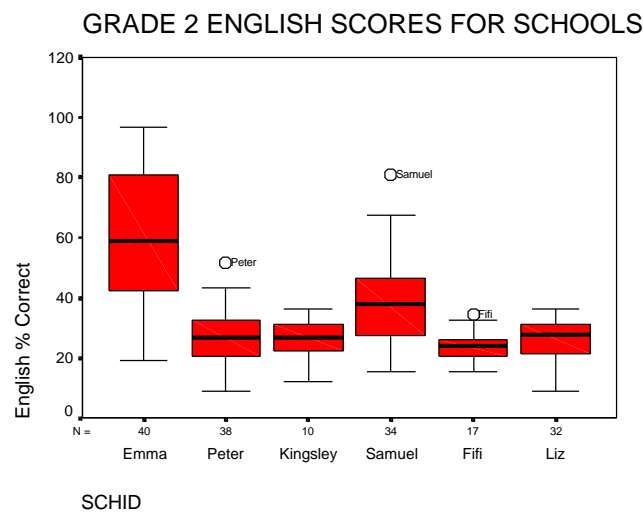
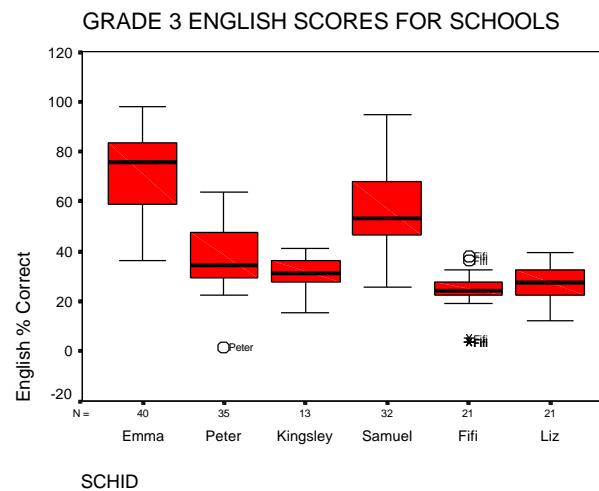


Chart 3.



From their remarks, at least some pupils did not think they benefited fully from an English MoI, as

they did not understand everything said in English. The following two remarks suggest this.

A Primary One pupil says, **“ Sometimes I do not understand the English.”**

Recordings of classroom activity suggest that pupils’ participation was not as rich as could have been expected. Teachers did most of the talking. Pupils’ responses tended to be monosyllabic and there was considerable use of choral repetition prompted by the teacher. Pupils rarely volunteered comments or asked questions although some of them did not understand what was being taught and could not provide correct answers when called upon to answer questions.

But will those who do not speak the local language benefit if that language were used as the medium?

There is evidence that at least initially, there could be difficulties. A class two pupil remarks shows: **“I do not understand Kasem very well.”**

After the official policy had been explained to parents and the majority had accepted that the policy would be beneficial, nevertheless some parents continued to harbour misgivings. They feared that it would be disadvantageous to children who did not speak the local language. Didimus, himself a teacher, remarked as follows:

“No. Why I am saying this is that it isn’t only pupils with Kasem background who attend the school. We have Asantes, Ewes, Dagaatis and what have you all attending the school. So that if we should agree that Kasem should be used, what will happen to those who cannot speak Kasem.”

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Teachers’ and community attitudes are not supportive of the current policy. It appears that there is a general feeling that the use of the first language as MoI is counter productive. Teachers also did not think the teaching of the local language should take up so much space on the timetable. Consequently, the policy is ignored as English takes centre stage. Teachers unfortunately do not appear to appreciate the disadvantages of pupils inability to participate fully in class events. If they did, then they probably did not attribute this to the MoI. Lack of an appreciation of the rationale for the use of first language medium probably accounts for the entrenchment of the present attitudes.

What happens in the classroom cannot be understood without considering the societal context. The perceptions and prejudices of teachers and pupils are all related to community perspectives on quality education. Historical facts explain attitudes to medium of instruction. Since colonial times there has been a dichotomy between the local way and the ‘Whiteman’s’ way with the former considered inferior

to the latter. The overt and covert colonial propaganda was that to progress the traditional ways must give way to the modern Euro-centric ways and this has meant the adoption of English and the marginalisation of the local languages. Schooling, English and progress which were conjoined have not been de-coupled. The place for local languages has been perceived to be the home and good Kasem is associated with illiterate Kasena people rather than with the formally educated or with teachers. Thus, teachers who refuse to use the local languages or teach them are not sanctioned because they are not seen to be doing the wrong thing. However, when the official language policy is seen to be actively promoted and championed by people who enjoy the trust of the community and when that policy is marketed as the official policy, then local communities will readily accept change, provided, as one parent pointed out, communities do not suspect that they are not being disadvantaged vis a vis the urban dwellers. Communities are by no means conservative in the ways. They need to be consulted in decision-making and provided with the information necessary to enable them to make informed choices.

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An Archetypal Dichotomy: Home – School

HOME

The Local Language

Local Culture

Tradition

Illiteracy

Old men

Shepherds

Farmers

Ancestral religion

The Hoe

SCHOOL

English

European ways

Modernity

Literacy

Teachers

Pupils

White collar jobs

Christianity

The pen